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The classroom is my castle: academics responding to quality assurance.

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of five long-serving academics in an institute of technology in Ireland on the growing need for quality assurance in the context of expansion in the higher education system. The academics in this study were in favour of quality assurance but they had difficulties with the form of quality assurance and how it was being implemented in the institute. There was also concern that it was being introduced when there was a perception that there was a greater diversity of student and academic standards were falling. The study also confirms that academics have a role to play in the implementation process, however academics responses to change are complex. The paper concludes that it is important to try and capture the responses of academic staff to optimise the outcome of the implementation process.

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1. Introduction

The publication of the Qualification (Education and Training) Act 1999 brought the issue of quality assurance to the forefront for higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland. The legislation was particularly challenging for some institutes of technology who had been guided by limited external requirements in the past and were now required to develop internally driven quality assurance procedures and self-evaluation systems. The purpose of this study is to identify how academics in an institute of technology have reacted to the growing focus on quality assurance in the context of expansion in the institute.

A brief overview of the forces for change and the growing demand for quality assurance in the institute of technology sector is given. The work of Henkel (2000) and Trowler (1998) on academics responding to change in UK universities provides an analytical framework and the study allows for some of the propositions in the literature to be tested in an institute of technology context.

The paper outlines the research process involved and provides an analysis and in depth examination of the findings and finally draws some broad conclusions and implications from the study. As well as being of interest to

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higher education administrators and academic leaders this paper will also interest academics at the forefront in dealing with change

2. The institute of technology sector and quality assurance

The formation of the institute of technology sector in the early 1970s was a major development in the structure of higher education in the Republic of Ireland and contributed significantly to the widening participation agenda. There are 13 institutes of technology (formerly the regional technical colleges) located throughout the Republic of Ireland. The institutes of technology were established as regional institutions to provide technical/technological education thereby forming one part of the binary higher education system in Ireland with the universities forming the other.

The institutes of technology (IOTs) have adapted to a rapidly changing economic environment and now offer undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes in addition to their normal certificate and diploma programmes. The institutes and their staff have also come under increasing pressure to involve themselves in research and development and they have not escaped the major changes and influences (e.g. massification, increasing state regulation, influence of industry, increased competition and focus on quality) on higher education identified by Becher and Trowler (2001):

There have been many shifts in topography of academic knowledge and more significantly, in the very landscape in which it lies: not only in higher education (HE) institutions and systems at the national and international level but also in the socio-economic contexts within which they operate. (p. 1)

Legislation (e.g. The Qualifications Act 1999) has provided the institutes with growing managerial and academic autonomy. There has been a large investment in the administration and managerial functions within the institutes and staff numbers have increased in line with the expansion of the sector. The institute of technology sector mainly recruits lecturing staff with experience in industry, and with limited prior lecturing experience. The expansion of higher education in Ireland has been similar to the rest of the developed world where the expansion has been accompanied by an increasing concern with quality assurance. According to Skilbeck (2001):

The growth of enrolments in the second half of the twentieth century is often singled out as giving rise to the most complex and crucial issues in higher education. It represents a profound qualitative change not just quantitative growth. (p. 43)

Despite the major changes in higher education in the Republic of Ireland, “academic quality assurance and quality audit procedures have not yet been applied systematically, to the higher education sector in Ireland” (Duff et al, 2000). The university and non-university sector have been dealt with separately over the years with the universities experiencing more autonomy.

The Qualification (Education and Training) Act 1999 has been the main influence and driver for quality assurance in the institute of technology sector. The Act set a landmark for the sector where it allowed for the granting of delegated authority to the institutes to validate and make their own awards for their programmes. To achieve delegated authority the institutes of technology were required to develop and implement their own quality assurance and audit procedures and agree them with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HEATC), the qualifications awarding body for third-level education and training institutions outside the university sector. This has resulted in the formalisation and bureaucratisation of procedures for e.g. teaching, assessment and course development. Changes in quality assurance have impacted on the individual academic and their day-to-day work requiring academics to co-operate with and adapt to change. This study will look at how academic staff in one institute of technology is responding to changes in quality assurance.

3. The academic responding to policy change

There is limited research available on quality assurance implementation in the higher education sector in Ireland. Henkel's (2000) findings regarding implementation of quality assurance in universities (old and new) in the United Kingdom provide a valuable analysis of policy implementation.

Henkel (2000) concluded from her research that academics at the micro level felt "that public accountability was the dominant principle of quality assurance and that it had been accepted in broad terms by academics" (Henkel, 2000, p. 97). They saw the increasing focus on quality arising from the expansion of the system, growth in student numbers and the ending of the binary system. However the "principle of public accountability was more equivocal than at first appeared" (Henkel, 2000, p. 97), and there was a degree of cynicism and unfavourable response to the form of quality assurance and how it was implemented. The introduction of quality assurance and accountability was complicated by the fact that:

they had been introduced within a complex of policies that meant dwindling resources, greatly increased workloads, and reduced professional esteem and conflicting demands, all of which represented a reduction of quality in higher education. (Henkel, 2000, p. 97)

Henkel (2000) found that academics felt that the bureaucracy and paper work involved in achieving accountability and in administering quality assurance systems were time consuming and "constituted a diversion from what academics considered to be their real educational tasks of preparing good lectures and seminars" (Henkel, 2000, p. 99). Such bureaucratisation also conflicted with academic values such as independence, individualisation and responsiveness and was mainly driven by the needs of students and assessors rather than being of any benefit to the academics themselves. Few academics were in favour of market forces, consumerism and treating the students as customers.

The academics' own definition of quality was disciplined and experienced based with a high focus on student learning, and that "they tended to discuss student learning primarily in terms of what students could or should learn" (Henkel, 2000, p.106). Therefore they felt that the individual academic had a major role to play in quality assurance and in the goals, inputs, processes and outputs of higher education.

According to Henkel (2000), academic identity and its formation is very important when considering policy change and she explains that identity "embodies an actor/structure perspective, within which it is possible to see academics as both distinctive individuals and embedded in the communities of primary importance to them, that is first the discipline and second the university" (Henkel, 2000, p. 251). Trowler's (1998) study of academics in a UK University (New U) responding to implementation of credit framework, places greater emphasis on the role of agency and points out that academic responses to change are conditioned by the relationship of both multiple and complex structural factors and agency and social action, whereby "different aspects of structure interact with each other while agency and structure also interact in important ways" (Trowler, 1998, p. 137).

Although operating within social structures, Trowler (1998) believes that the individual academic has a significant role to play in the implementation of change. This supports the bottom-up perspective on policy change, which emphasise the importance of agency and gaining an understanding of the values, behaviours and attitudes of academic staff at the ground level, "they have their own situated rationality" (Knight & Trowler, 2001, p. 4). Lipsky's (1980) view of the "street level bureaucrat" also emphasises the academic's role in policy implementation and the change process. Reynolds and Saunders (1987) idea of the "implementation staircase" is also useful, where policy undergoes formation during its time on the staircase and the final outcome may be quite different from the initial vision.

It is easier to bring about change if there is congruence between the individual's attitude, values, behaviour and goals towards the change in question and the structural aspects of the system. The degree of congruence will determine how successful the implementation of the change will be. However, as these factors are ever changing it is difficult to generalise about academics and change. Henkel (2000) found that academics responded differently to new definitions of quality policies which were being introduced in HEI's: some rejected them, some reacted with ambivalence, some found ways of accommodating them and others accepted them and felt they were necessary to meet new challenges. However, there was little evidence that "fundamental beliefs about quality in education and

the conditions for achieving it had been displaced” (Henkel, 2000, p. 109).

Trowler (1998) in his study of “New U” explains that the academics’ responses to change varied and could be categorised under four broad headings: sinking, swimming, coping and reconstructing. These categories are not mutually exclusive and academics may move from category to category depending on the situation:

Sinking - The academic is passive, accepts and conforms to the changes even if it is leading to worsening working conditions. The academic does not have the resources to handle the change, even when it is not consistent with the academic’s ideology.

Swimming - The academic is positive towards and accepts the changes. The academic thrives on the opportunities their implementation presents.

Coping strategies - Some academics can develop coping strategies to help them deal with the consequences of change and their new environment. Trowler (1998) points out that this approach can often lead to negative consequences for students and others. The academic has a prevailing negative attitude to administration and avoids activities such as meetings and extra work where possible.

Policy reconstruction - Policy reconstruction refers to “the processes academics engage in when they reinterpret and reconstruct policy on the ground, using strategies to effectively change the policy, sometimes resisting change, sometimes altering its direction” (Trowler, 1998, p. 126). The academics adopt a proactive, interpretive and innovative approach to change. This also includes academics who are concerned about the status of lecturers and the need to guard the profession and that they were not merely there to “satisfy the whims of the student market” (Trowler, 1998, p. 133).

4. Methodology

The qualitative and quantitative research models are broad models drawn from the social sciences, which help us with the research process and provide an overall framework as to how we look at reality. According to Miles and Huberman (1994):

Qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth unlike quantitative researchers, who aim for larger numbers of context-stripped cases and seek statistical significance. (p. 27)

The research design and methodology used in this research is qualitative and exploratory in nature and utilises a multiple case study to explore the experiences of five academics working in a single institute of technology in Ireland on the purpose of quality assurance and on how it was being implemented. The paper focused on academics that had worked in the Institute for at least five years, as it was felt that the changes and issues in question would have a greater impact on long serving academics that had been used to prior systems. The institute consists of a number of academic schools: The School of Business Studies, The School of Engineering, and The School of Science and Computing. The respondents in this study worked at the same level of Lecturer, had permanent tenure and taught on a range of courses up to undergraduate degree level.

Lecturer A

Had worked in the institute for seven and a half years and lectured in a range of subjects in the School of Engineering. He had worked in industry prior to coming into academia and had recently completed his PhD.

Lecturer B

Had worked in the institute for six years and lectured in the School of Science and Computing. She had a PhD and her prior role was as an academic at a local university.

Lecturer C

Had worked in the institute for seven years and lectured in the School of Engineering. He had a Master’s Degree and

his previous work experience was gained in Industry.

Lecturer D

Had worked in the institute for 13 years and lectured in the School of Business Studies. He had a Master's Degree and his previous work experience was gained in Industry.

Lecturer E

Had worked in the institute for 30 years and he lectured in the School of Business Studies and had a Master's Degree.

The primary data collection procedure used in this study was a semi-structured open-ended, face-to-face interview. Miller (1991) explains that most interviews range from a highly structured situation with a planned series of questions to a very informal talk with no structure except for some areas of discussion raised by the interviewer. However, as Mason (1996) point out, most interviews in data-collecting stages of research are semi-structured in nature, "the term 'qualitative interviewing' is usually intended to refer to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing" (p. 38).

The respondents were interviewed in their natural setting – the institute where they worked. The nature of the research was explained to the respondents in advance of the fieldwork and they were assured that their anonymity would be preserved and that the process would be carried out in strict confidence. The interviews were constructed to allow discussion under the following headings:

- The main driver for quality assurance
- Expansion in the system
- Growing diversity of student and academic standards
- Facilities/Administration
- The purpose of quality assurance
- Implementation process
- Academics role in the implementation process

An interview record form was used for all interviews which contained some data regarding the interview including: name of interviewee, time and date of interview. The form also contained a number of key research questions and some useful probes to guide the interview. Some notes were also recorded on these forms but the main data recording procedure used was a tape recorder. The recordings were transcribed later.

5. Findings

5.1. Diversity of student/Academic standards

Similar to other institutes of technology, there had been significant course development in the institute over the last ten years, with all schools now offering the option for students to progress from national diploma courses to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. The academics were in favour of this 'academic drift' and providing students with the opportunity to progress to degree level within the institute of technology sector:

I think it is great because there is no reason why we can't offer degrees or research degrees.
(Respondent B)

New courses and significant investment in campus facilities had resulted in student numbers rising sharply in the institute in recent years. The respondents indicated that there had been a greater diversity in the student population, with more mature students, disabled students and international students attending the college. There was a general

perception that student abilities had declined over the years raising the question of standards. At the same time, student expectations had also risen sharply and the pressure from management to recruit and retain students was increasing. Therefore quality assurance was being introduced when expansion in higher education and the changing student profile was challenging the academics:

Students are being taken in with fewer qualifications. If this continues students will be accepted on to courses that are beyond them which will leave academics to deal with the problem. (Respondent B)

I just feel that if the push is on for more inclusive education then something will have to give. You can't have so many people doing a diploma whose mathematical standards are not as good as people ten years ago. (Respondent C)

The quality of student, it is universally agreed seems to have declined and there is talk of dumbing down of syllabi. On the one hand you have the sort of emphasis on quality assurance and maintaining standards and on the other hand the individual lecturer has the problem of the student who is not fully committed. (Respondent E)

5.2. Facilities/Administration

The respondents indicated that there had been a major improvement in the institute's facilities and infrastructure, which had enhanced the student experience (e.g. computers, library, restaurant) and there had also been a significant increase in management and administration in the college. Such developments support a more comprehensive definition of quality assurance that goes beyond academic related issues. Although there was a general acceptance with the need for an expansion of the administration/management function in the institute, the respondents felt that there was some degree of a them and us attitude existing between administration/management and academia:

We are a very different place now and we need to have a proper administration in place. A lot of the problems result from the academics not really knowing what individual people in administration do. Then again people in administration think lecturers have a great job? It cuts both ways. (Respondent A)

There was also a general feeling that the growing administration function hadn't benefited the academic that much and that a lot of the new staff appointments in administration and infrastructure improvements were for the benefit of the student and the central administration areas:

If I were a student I would be delighted, but for staff on the frontline there hasn't been a lot of change – their issues never get on to the agenda. (Respondent D)

It seems the more layers there are, the more admin work comes on the lecturer.
(Respondent C)

5.3. Purpose and motivation for quality assurance

The respondents were generally in favour of the need for improved quality assurance to deal with new challenges and hoped that it would lead to consistency and enhance student education:

It has become very vague over the last few years regarding marks and standards: how you deal with students, how you deal with continuous assessments, how do you deal with problem students etc. It seems to have changed from one year to the next. In the new quality assurance system there seems to be a proper system in place for dealing with such issues. (Respondent A)

I think it is a good thing because it formalises what most people are doing anyway.

(Respondent B)

However, on further examination, similar to Henkel's (2000) findings, the respondents expressed concerns about the form of quality assurance that was being adopted by the organisation and its implementation:

I think lecturers are a bit sceptical about the whole quality agenda and see it as another bureaucratic hurdle to enable management to either, control things, give a PR slant to the thing or use it in this case as a prerequisite for autonomy and self-awarding status. Lecturers feel that this quality thing avoids the real issues of student access, suitability of students for courses, retention rates the whole learning, examination and assessment system. (Respondent E)

You are just going to kill the course in the long run. We want to produce good quality technicians and degree holders. If they are no good to the employers out there they won't have jobs and we won't have jobs. You need to be sure that they will be able to do the job. (Respondent A)

Respondents were particularly concerned that the new procedures would lead to paperwork generation and bureaucratisation:

A formal system is good but you can't be bogged down in paperwork.
(Respondent A)

This whole quality agenda is still emerging. We don't know yet what the end result will be but we have our suspicion that we go down the British route of endless form filling and bureaucracy and to that extent it is being tacitly resisted even it is not being politically correct to resist anything that calls itself quality assurance. (Respondent E)

The responses were also consistent with Henkel's (2000) findings in that there was significant concern that the process would only focus on the needs of the student and on academic surveillance issues – lecturer evaluation. There was also concern that the developmental needs of the lecturer required to deal with new challenges such as falling standards were not adequately considered:

I am concerned about the way it is implemented and managed. The feeling tends to be that the lecturer is squeezed in the middle. Words that are bandied about like students being the customer don't sit well in my opinion in education. I really feel uncomfortable with that. I mean you service or deliver to a point but there should be more to education than just that on its own. (Respondent C)

It should have been dressed up as professional development rather than surveillance control. The quality manual has a fair bit of surveillance control aspects without giving the lecturers the opportunity to become better at their job and being given the support that they need in advance. It is just tied in with our ability to offer our own awards. It is not integrated with a human resources policy nor integrated with a teaching and professional development policy. (Respondent D)

People are coming in now whose base standard in reading writing and maths is not great. We need to be trained to deal with these issues and if that is not provided then there is going to be more frustration in the job with maybe resentment towards the students themselves and it's not their fault. (Respondent C)

5.4. Implementation

The implementation of quality procedures and processes and application for delegated authority by the institute to make awards was a challenging and a long process. The process included the formation of steering groups,

consultation meetings with staff and the setting up of an intranet site as a communication instrument. The findings indicate that from the academic's perspective the predominant approach to change was the top down managerial led approach that was driven by external forces. Although there were attempts to involve staff in consultation, the majority of respondents did not feel that their views or attitudes on quality assurance was reflected in the outcome and did not feel they had much control or ownership of the process:

There was a consultation process but I don't think people would be confident about using the e-mail and online comments for any form of debate, as it leads to problems with unanimity. There were meetings but I noticed people stopped going to them. So maybe there was a bit of disillusionment, a bit of detachment. I think the lecturers feel it didn't really constitute proper consultation and it doesn't help when people feel that they are being squeezed and other areas don't have to be as accountable as we have to be to the student body. (Respondent C)

The quality manual was forced through, there were a whole series of meetings to review its implementation. It was completely top down. There was a consultation process that doesn't mean that it was bottom up. I think you need to give people a chance at becoming better lecturers before you start bogging them down in the quality manual. The steps in the process could have been thought out a little bit more. (Respondent D)

Respondent B seemed satisfied with the consultation process:

We got a copy of each draft of it. Then there was a meeting where every point that was made was noted down. So I think our opinions were taken on board. (Respondent B)

The findings indicate that deciding on bottom up strategies and the form and degree of consultation is a complex process and requires careful consideration to ensure engagement from staff.

Despite the growing pressure of widening access and the increasing push for quality and accountability, the respondents appeared content with their role and drew some solace from feeling that they were still in command of the classroom:

One of the things I like about this job is that when you go into the classroom you are your own person. (Respondent A)

You still have academic freedom in the classroom, which is quite a powerful position. (Respondent C)

I suppose there is the whole academic subtext which is that no matter what changes are implemented, often for what academics would consider cosmetic reasons, the basic underlying situation of facing a group of students in a class room teaching a syllabus still remains the same and the changes that are sometimes forced on teachers can be bent, can be got over and can be circumvented. (Respondent E)

Although they did not feel they played a major part in the formulation of the quality assurance approach in the institute and the resulting structural changes, these findings indicate that the academic may have some power at ground level to influence policy. This indicates that agency and the individual academic's action can play a significant part in the implementation of policy change (Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 1998; Lipsky, 1980; Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). At the same time, the responses confirm that it is difficult to generalise about academics and change and it is possible that they adopted different approaches to different elements of the policy. The findings are broadly consistent with Trowler's (1998) coping strategy and policy reconstruction, in that the academics felt that

whatever happens they can still influence change at their level, in the short term anyway. Using Henkel's (2000) categories, ambivalence and accommodating changes seem to be the best way to describe the respondent's attitude to quality assurance.

6. Discussion/Conclusion

The last three decades have been a time of transition and expansion in the higher education sector in Ireland. The institute of technology sector has been at the forefront of these developments and has had to cope with rising student numbers and expectations and the diversification and differentiation of institutions and courses. The publication of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 brought new challenges and placed the issue of accountability and quality assurance to the forefront of most agendas. The growing need for quality assurance impacts on all staff and levels within the sector but has a particular impact on academic staff that has experienced a degree of autonomy and with limited individual assessment and accountability.

This study confirms that the implementation of quality assurance and the balancing of autonomy with accountability is an intricate process and needs to be looked at in the context of other major trends such as the expansion of the higher education system and the changing student profile. Despite the investment in campus development, administration and management functions, the respondents in this study felt that such developments had provided little or no benefit to them and had not helped them in their role and had led to more bureaucracy and structure. Although the institute of technology sector was set up to increase participation rates and support widening access to the HE system, it was evident from the responses that some of the academics had ideologies that were in conflict with this and were more in line with 'elitist' or 'traditionalist' view of higher education. They were particularly concerned about the fall in the general standard of the student. Perhaps this was related to their own background and time spent as a student in the higher education system and their professional background.

The respondents' attitude towards the growing focus on quality assurance was consistent with the findings in Henkel's (2000) study. The respondents accepted the need for quality assurance and accountability. However they were concerned about the form it would take and that it would lead to bureaucratisation and paperwork and was driven by consumerism and academic surveillance. This conflicted with the academics' beliefs, as they wanted to see the process enhancing the students learning environment and that quality assurance should permeate all areas of the organisation.

Although the academics welcomed some broader aspects of quality assurance, they were uncomfortable when the procedures impacted directly on them and threatened their autonomy or were under scrutiny, perhaps, indicating insecurity. There was also a general feeling that quality assurance procedures and processes were being implemented at a time when academic standards were dropping and the development needs of the academic to cope with new demands were not being catered for. As Respondent D comments "You also have to look at the people in the front line delivering the service, the lecturers, there should be an equal focus in that direction as well".

The findings were consistent with Trowler's (1998) and Henkel's work (2000) in that it was difficult to identify one unifying academic response to change. Although there were attempts to consult with the academics in the development of quality assurance procedures, the direction and momentum for change came from the top. There did not appear to be any significant attempt to understand the academics viewpoint on quality assurance and the objective appeared to be one of getting the academics to agree with managements' view and have the procedures and processes implemented on schedule. The academics appeared to accept this at an early stage and retreated to the sanctuary of the classroom where they felt they retained control, "it was a *fait accompli*" (Respondent C) and adopted an approach of ambivalence/passiveness towards meetings, consultations etc. Therefore, a consultation process must be meaningful to ensure engagement from staff.

The adoption of quality assurance procedures is only one phase of the quality assurance implementation process. The procedures still have to be implemented and it is at this stage, in the classroom, "cocooned in their own syllabi" (Respondent E) where the academic indicated they were still in charge and could influence change. This is

important, as it is likely that it is at this stage where any weaknesses in the change process will become evident and where major differences between organisational goals and academic goals become apparent. The academic may no longer acquiesce to wishes of management.

These findings from an institute of technology in Ireland are consistent with the work of Henkel (2000) and Trowler (1998) in Universities in the UK and confirm that implementing change in a higher education environment is a complex process. Strong vision and leadership is needed to bring about policy change in higher education. However, the process also requires an understanding of the values, behaviours, attitudes and responses of academic staff at ground level and their ability to “amend and even create policy” (Trowler, 1998, p. 104) if the outcomes from policy implementation are to be optimised.

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